

Valkenburgh. And I feel that subdued excitement brimming over into full-fledged glee as I assemble the current issue you hold in your hand, an issue that contains work of the “palpable quality” our founding editors envisioned more than 20 years ago.

In this issue, you will find the first, second and third place winners from all three of our literary contests of the year 2000, along with work from some of the finest poets writing in English today. We have an interview with Lawrence Sutin, a memoirist who is redefining the form, along with a rare glimpse of a “postcard” he wrote that didn’t make it into the final version of *A Postcard Memoir*. As the new editor, I want to take this opportunity to reaffirm our commitment to literature in all genres that, as our mission statement puts it, “pushes the limits of form or executes traditional forms exquisitely.” It’s gratifying to know our small magazine is being read more and more widely across the nation; recently, one of our contributors, Donna Steiner, saw her essay from the *Bellingham Review* reprinted in *Utne Reader*. It’s these kinds of successes that keep the “subdued excitement” brewing.

As I take over the helm of the *Bellingham Review* from Robin Hemley, I’m grateful to him for the high standard he so effectively created for this magazine. How else would we be able to boast such accomplished judges for our contests: this year we were proud to work with Jo Ann Beard (creative nonfiction), Josip Novakovitch (fiction), and Reginald Shepherd (poetry). I’m grateful, too, for Bruce Beasley, Suzanne Paola, and Kathleen Halme, faculty colleagues who volunteer their time to advise us on poetry and nonfiction selections and to solicit work from both well-known and emergent writers. As part of this team, I am confident the *Bellingham Review* will continue to grow in stature, continuing to provide a venue where the famous and not-yet-famous co-mingle. And last, but not least, thanks to you, our readers. It is your gaze that brings us alive.



ON NOT HAVING CLEANED THE HOUSE

Mary Grimm

1st Place: Annie Dillard Award, for Creative Nonfiction
Final Judge: Jo Ann Beard

Once the house was new and had the cleanness of new yellow wood, pipes as shiny as mirrors, jewels of nuts and bolts holding parts together as if they were something to be worn. Paint lay on the walls like a caress of green, of blue. In the attic, birds looked in the windows, pecking against the glass in their envy, they slid on the slated slope of the roof, their claws clicking as they contemplated the chimney, its red bricks new-fired.

In its youth there was a baby who lived there and slept in one of the tiny bedrooms, the one with the wallpaper that was like stars, or the other blooming with yellow flowers. The baby was one of several probably, teased and nursed and cossetted and ignored by three brothers and sisters or five, the baby crawling on the floor among their socked and booted feet, picking up bits of lint from the maroon rug with its great ghostly white flowers, its knees a little grubby which its mother wouldn’t notice until she picked it up to take it into the kitchen for lunch, mashed potatoes, mashed peas, shredded meat, crumbs of bread rubbed into the wood of the table. And they all crowded in after the mother and the baby, eating lunch at the same time, dropping crumbs of their sandwiches onto the floor where they worked their way into the cracks, where they stayed for a hundred years, sleeping like Sleeping Beauty. The baby would have had these five or seven brothers and sisters, but would be missed when it died as if it were the only one, its photograph taken in death as if it were a prince or a princess, in its best dress, white lace and

silken bonnet strings. In the photo, which lay in the depths of the house, the baby is sitting propped up against a window of the house, in the dining room where the western sun streams in the afternoon. Its arms are crossed in its lap, its eyes are closed against the streaming of the light, its eyelashes like lace against its tiny petal cheeks. This photograph lay in the house for a hundred years, flattening itself, curling slightly at the edges, hiding at the back of the linen closet drawer. For a hundred years, no one tidied it or swept it up or dusted it.

It's not that I didn't learn how to dust. Every Saturday afternoon I dusted, in hand a soft rag that had been a diaper or towel or old shirt, my mother's emissary into the land of housekeeping. I leaned, swooning, over the long smooth sweep of the dining room table. The carved glass knobs of the china cabinet fit into my hands like the knob of a scepter. My dustclothed fingers knew the folds and wrinkles of the old woman carved in wood, forever sitting and making lace on top of our bookcase. This was the field of Saturday afternoon, the mossy carpet under my feet, the wooden forest of furniture. Each week, invisibly, the dust had returned to manifest itself on the dustcloth like the stigmata.

In this house there is a secret place where the past can be turned like the pages of a book. Upstairs, first room on the right, in the closet, back left corner, can't miss it. Against the baseboard the wallpaper is loose and comes away from the wall like a fan. Who was it who liked this abstract design, hard little chips of color? Who covered up the cherry blossoms endlessly falling down the wall like pink snow? At bottom is the kind of plaster that has hair in it, hair combed from the manes of horses standing patiently to let their bodies be useful one last time.

When the old woman lived here she moved from room to

room as if there were a path known only to her. Her feet touched the floors softly, softly on the wood, softly the carpet's worn white flowers, softly the old brown linoleum, as if she were an Indian in the forest disturbing not even a leaf. The light from the windows streamed in as she found her way, the softness of each step raising glowing motes of dust. The chairs in the kitchen salute her, three of them or five. She rubs her dish cloth over the table, pressing, scrubbing one more time the grain of the wood. If it has darkened over the years, how can she tell? In the basement the tap drips, each drop the tick in a slow clock. The stone floor has heaved like the ocean, but slowly, so that a marble set down anywhere will roll away to live in a corner. In the back, one last jar of canned tomatoes sits on a shelf, a relic of the old garden.

I threw away the plastic flowers when I moved in, with plastic I could be ruthless. I threw away the old phone, as heavy as an anvil. The couch shaped like a boat, like a coffin, crouched on the tree lawn for a few days, as if someone might go out to sit on it, as if there might be a need, there by the street, for extra seating. But with the family of shot glasses I was more tender. Although I no longer go to church, I could not throw away the small holy water font with an angel's head.

There is the scrubbing of the kitchen floor, the wiping of the woodwork. There is the cleaning of the stove, of the sink with sharp grains of cleanser, the washing of the windows. There is the moving through the house with a dust mop, which anyone might do, the dust mop that is like a small hairy animal. When it is shaken outside, what escapes? This continual moving over the surfaces of the house, this slow friction of hand and cloth, a woman's hand, the cloth that was once the baby's blanket—what does it mean? The baby's mother moves her hand more and more slowly, watching the fading pictures flow over the wood,

the smiling teddy bear, the rocking horse, the small blue scallops at the edge, now ragged. When her hand stops, she stands there until the other children come home from school, banging their books on the floor with a thump.

Standing at the windows looking out, the yard and the street and the other houses move in a slow swirl, the grave pacing of walkers on the sidewalk speeded up like an old movie, always moving to the corner, the trolley stop, the bus, the little store where milk is sold, to school, to their job at the telephone company where even in the depression there is work, to the shoe repair store, to the dry cleaners owned by an old Hungarian woman who is dying among the chemical-stiff clothing. She is going to sell her business to a black couple who will join the church under protests, which will die away. From the windows the movement outside is a skein of lines, almost visible, crossing and recrossing. A cloth may be pressed against the windows, wiping. Once the windows were soft, the glass like sheets of candy, gleaming like water, but they have hardened now, nothing passes through. (The blue cleaner squirting from its bottle can never wipe away the mark of the tape that held up the Christmas decorations, put there incautiously by a child's hand, a red and green construction paper Christmas tree, pointy, rough-edged.) From the windows, standing, looking out, wiping your hands on your apron, your jeans, resting your head against the glass, so hard now and cool against the skin, you can watch the birds fly across the sky, almost too fast to see, the leaves as small as a squirrel's ear, growing large, turning red, turning brown.

Birds come into the house because they love it, large cave, roofed with stone, pillars as white as cream. They wriggle in under the eaves, fly down the chimney. Inside they are bewitched, slaves to the dark, to the unfairness of the ceiling. They scabble at the unhappy enchantment of windows,

trying to remember how to fly through clear spaces, how to soften the slabs of air. If there is a man who knows how, he can catch them in his hands where they lie without fluttering, their eyes soft and bright. He can put them in the old birdcage and set it on the kitchen table for a surprise. When they have danced and sung for the children who are left, he can take them to the porch and let them fly from his palms. But if they must, they die there, they lie in the basement by the furnace, behind the hot water heater, for a hundred years, their wings sodden bits of fluff, their bones flattening. When they are found, they ride the flat bed of the old spade outside.

If the children have gone, are there still dolls here? Is there still a wagon rusting in the basement, a sled? Does the old metal bed that slept three ring when the breeze from the open door moves through its springs?

On moving day, the old furniture met the new, stiffly, politely, no reason to make a scene. Crowded in like a family of immigrants, they crouched together, making the best of things. A path had to be made for the living, a route to walk to the alarm, to the cup of coffee, the toast. At night, the cupboards revealed their treasures: a yellow vase, a box made from popsickle sticks, four marbles in a small glass jar. Yes, there is the photo, yes the baby is still dead. The brothers and sisters of the baby have grown up, they live in another photo where they sit around the kitchen table with glasses in their hands, and also in Florida. The furniture has to wait in the depot of the dining room for a long time while places are found. One chair, one lamp at a time moves out to populate the house. Here, the sewing table, here the cushion with a picture of a cat on it. On the wall, the photo of the new family's ancestors, 19th century faces looking into the twentieth. Sitting on the couch that did not go out to the lawn, I felt disquiet. I felt the old paths of the house under my feet,

the ghosts of the old furniture. Who would I meet in the morning when I came down the stairs, whose hand still rummaged among the plastic flowers, looking for a photo? For a long time, the house was stiff around me, hardened.

The children would sit, twittering like birds, to hear the stories of the princess who is kissed, the princess who sleeps behind barbed roses, the prince who is turned into a swan, who climbs up a ladder of hair. In the long evenings of winter, snow falling outside the windows which were slowly growing harder, icier, at the sunny bedtimes of summer, sunburned legs restless on the sheets. One would need a glass of water, one a handkerchief, one a doll dressed all in plaid like a Scotsman. The doll had a purse but it is long gone, lost, laid to rest in the closet with the winter clothes. The purse is bent and dusty, but still holds a single penny. Three in a bed, their heads like the knobs of clothespins above the sheet, they yawn, fighting sleep, for who knows how long it will be before they wake? They have prayed, yes, but they remember the baby who has not come back. The baby was kissed by their mother who is as beautiful as a princess, by their father the prince, but still, still she slept. Downstairs, the lamp is glowing.

Outside the house, dust is falling from the stars, the dust of a hundred suns is sifting down, through the boards, through the cracks. The dark sky is lying on the roof, the stars press against the slates.

In the afternoons when I might clean I sit looking out the windows. I have a dream in my head of cleaning, of the starched apron, the pearls, the shirtwaisted dress. I know the romance of the full larder, the gleaming dishes, the silverware kept in a velvet box, the dance of the broom, the vacuum cleaner—for they were revealed to me by my mother. Feather dusters,

embroidered dish towels, jars of shell-shaped soaps; a cocktail with a cherry in it, the glass as clear and hard as if made of ice. I learned to iron, the hot heaviness gliding under my hand, the sharp smell of crisped, not quite burned, cloth rising to my nose like the rarest perfume. But when I reach out my hand, all this is gone. I am thinking of the marble in the corner, of the bird lying on the basement floor.

I tell myself that dust is not negligible. When it swirls in the streams of sun it is as beautiful as gold, and if we cannot spend it, all the better. When it lies in the accumulation of years it is as furry as a loved animal. It is light, volatile, it flies through the air like a swarm of microscopic birds. The stripe of dust I might wipe up with a white-gloved finger is not dirt: these are cosmic particles, stony bits of the Acropolis, the transfigured flecks of skin and hair that may have belonged to heroes, saints, lovers, children, babies not yet a year old who yet could walk and speak a few words as well as anyone.

When the baby died, yes, they were sad. Yes, the baby's things were put away in a drawer and the mother, her beautiful princess eyes wet and red, would open the drawer when no one was at home to look at the little shirts, the dress with real lace, the bonnet that the baby had never liked to wear. The baby had pushed the bonnet away, not caring that it had flowers on it, yellow flowers as lovely as if they were alive. The baby's mother couldn't help but think of this, of the baby pushing the bonnet off, when she was making dinner for the other three or five children, when her hands were busy with the vegetables, putting out bowls of cherries, of grapes, cutting quick slices of cake, equal in size from the eldest to the youngest. The vision of the baby's hand pushing the bonnet off was always before her for a while, and also how the baby in the picture let her bonnet lie against her forehead, never caring, never lifting a hand, how the

bonnet strings lay across her chest, their bow perfect and even. Even when she started to forget, the bow stayed with her, the silken strings in their loops. She dreamed them for years, dreamed them when as an old woman she walked the paths of the house, her hands touching the furniture, for support and for comfort. Dreamed them when she stood looking out the window as the birds flew quickly past, the cars in a slow stream down the street. Dreamed them in Florida where she lay in her nursing home bed that the eldest son had found for her. When he came to visit her on Wednesdays and Sundays, she would listen to him talk without answering, her hand restless on the sheets, the perfectly tied bow always before her.

Monday was washing day, yes, and Saturday for baking, but the other days? It was easy to forget.

The house is crumbling, has always been crumbling. Since the beginning: deep in the house are secret caches of sawdust that sifted from the hands of the builders. Each year of its life is marked by the long slow sift that is the house transforming itself into dust, dust falling like snow, like the pink snow of cherry blossoms. The light streams through the windows of the dining room each afternoon notwithstanding, soft sun on the windows, on the reconciled furniture. The birds fly past, weaving a net about the house that is fine but as strong as steel. The crumbs sleep in the cracks, among the flowers of the carpet. If the basement tap drips, it cannot be heard. When I move through the house, I am as silent as I can be, my foot meeting the floor with the softness of a caress, so as not to disturb the lace of the dust, the movement of the golden dust that spirals in the air. The windows are made of looking-glass and in them I can see many things. I am wearing the house like a garment. I am leaving myself here, swept into the corners, rolling into cracks, rubbed into the wood of the furniture like the purest, finest oil. I am

looking for a marble, a photo, the plaid purse whose penny I can spend. At night when I cannot sleep I will fill the holy water font, I will go out into the night and lie on the old sofa, the boat sofa, and watch the house for a hundred years as roses grow over it, soft petals closing the eyes of its windows, sharp thorns at the door.